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BATIK—BY EDGAR MILLER
ANNUAL APPLIED ARTS EXHIBITION

ON NATURE AND ART

THE small boy, bending over his speller, laboriously deciphered the heavy words, and with a crushing sense of the inevitable he slowly grasped their meaning. Experience he had had, but it had still left him hope, for who does not have his reasonable doubts about experience? But here was the written word—and the small boy was just learning to read. The written word, as everyone knows, is the inflexible, pitiless, truth. And this is what it said: "Al-most an-y an-i-mal that pre-tends to run can out-strip the av-er-age ur-chin."

The well-known chambered nautilus "whom poets feign," is commonly understood to drift upon the sea and then to sink when the time comes for it. But he is as little casual or "realistic" as one could possibly conceive. The tee-square and the triangle simply can't touch his "more stately mansions"—excepting at one or two points at a time. You can't

conventionalize his fine volutes, for they have already outrun your poor power of refinement, to say nothing of the factor of exquisite feeling which has been "thrown in" with their impeccable design.

When Martin Schongauer made the annunciation angel which is in the Palmer collection now in the Print Room, he was doubtless only the patient master, bending over his work, trying to be a good craftsman, to design well, to draw well, to "do" well—and he little dreamed that to someone four centuries hence his angel would come with a persistent suggestion of thornapple trees on a wind-swept cliff and a strange and overpowering sense of "presence." To attempt to say more about this mysterious quality which many of these early works possess is to court the disaster which loves the indiscreet. We can only refer to it in the words of the lamented James Hall as "a certain warmth and intimacy"; but for the quality itself, which is like the memory of old, friendly dreams, we have no word but "It."

Did Schongauer at his quiet task suddenly feel something coursing through his blood, like a horseman galloping over the sands, to a destination of its own choosing? Did he bend closer to his craft to keep his head, sit inarticulate, then wonder what had passed? Did he ever see it in his picture? Whence came "It"?

This is the period of the exhibition of Applied Arts. Again we have had opportunity to see beauty growing in things made for use. What has it to do with

the representation of nature as we see it in pictures? Are these embroidered flowers with their fascinating deviations from the "natural" form to be understood by seeing the picture in them?

The entry of nature's forms into the history of design has followed a more or less traceable sequence. Situations and areas have grown through the exigencies of construction and of use, and in the broad, inevitable spaces so produced the "natural" motive seems in time to have made its appearance, springing up where there was a foothold or a little soil, like "flowers in the crannied wall."

Mr. Pond in *The Meaning of Architecture* points out that the realistic forms of the Corinthian capital came late and apparently through evolution, and that the Gothic capital, a chaste and restrained recognition of the union of functions at the meeting of pier with arch, came into being long before foliated ornaments were introduced at this point. The "log cabin" design of our grandmothers' needlework existed as a structural form in Egyptian mummy wrappings and, instead of being developed through an attempt to portray the cabins of pioneer days, was a going concern of great antiquity when it acquired its present name.

Design essentially is not engaged in portraying nature. Its roots are in deeper soil. It is not based on nature, for it is nature itself writing its own biography with the hand of man as its instrument. It is the same in kind whether written in the annular rings of a tree by a power we do not understand or whether in the stones and tiles of the ages through the mysterious and univer-



DECORATION—BY FREDERIC M. GRANT
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sal human impulse toward beauty. The fascination which impels one in an unthinking moment to scribble rings upon rings on a piece of paper is, when disciplined and ordered, the impulse which makes the rhythm of an Ionic volute a living delight. Nature itself is playing in that unthinking impulse, and when man makes the thing his own the thing is art. Art is nature's "human end," so to speak, or nature is the "cosmic end" of art. The leaves in Corinthian and Gothic capitals and the nature-forms which abound in the art of all the periods celebrate man's discovery of the surprising parallel of his labor with the labor of the earth. Emerson grasped the whole idea of design, both in structure and in ornament, when he wrote:

"The hand that rounded Peter's dome
And groined the aisles of Christian
Rome
Wrought in a sad sincerity;
Himself from God he could not free;
He builded better than he knew—
The conscious stone to beauty grew."